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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 5983  
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002366

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DEPT FOR SA/FO GASTRIGHT, SA/CT AND SA/A  
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN, KAMEND  
CENTCOM FOR POLAD, CG CFA-A, CG CJTF-76

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2015  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PTER](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: REPORT FROM KANDAHAR: CIVILIAN CASUALTIES IN U.S.  
STRIKE ON TALIBAN - TALIBAN PROPAGANDA?

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Classified By: DCM RICHARD NORLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY:

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11. (S) Conflicting reports about the U.S.-led forces (CJSOTF) attack the evening of May 21 on the village of Azizi in Panjwai district about 25 kilometers from Kandahar City reflect, in part, an ongoing Taliban psychological operations (psyops) campaign to misrepresent coalition military operations in southern Afghanistan. U.S. military sources informed the Canadian-led Regional Command South (RC-S) that initial estimates indicated that up to 80 Taliban may have been killed in the engagement. The press reported the morning of May 22 that 40 Taliban had been killed, but also alleged that 30 to 50 civilians were killed or wounded. These reports were apparently based on information from paid stringers who were not on the scene and on "witness" statements, some of which may have come from Taliban sources. The Taliban's ongoing psyops campaign will no doubt continue and will require counter measures on our part, including, perhaps, more advance notice to RC-S to prepare for the information operations that will need to follow such engagements to prevent the Taliban from controlling the media's initial reporting. End Summary.

12. (S) RC-S has not been able to confirm yet whether or not there were any civilian casualties in the CJSOTF orchestrated attack on Azizi village southwest of Kandahar City. The initial reports from U.S. military sources indicated they estimated that 80 Taliban were killed in the engagement.

13. (S) In the past two weeks, the Taliban have been massing forces in villages not far from Kandahar City, raising suspicions that they are planning a headline-grabbing attack on a high-profile target in the provincial capital. The

spate of heavy fighting this past week near Kandahar City by coalition forces targeted build-ups of Taliban in districts near Kandahar City. Early analysis indicates that these Taliban include some groups which normally operate in neighboring provinces as well as new recruits from Pakistan. The U.S.-led operation in Azizi was based on good intelligence and was a necessary sweep of Taliban insurgents who were probably not indigenous forces.

14. (S) RC-S and PRT Kandahar advised Kandahar Governor Khalid Assadullah to address the media, highlighting the positive aspects of the engagement in Azizi. Assadullah has been an effective spokesperson, particularly with international media, in putting across the mission of the coalition and the nature of the fight, i.e., "collateral damage will occur when the enemy shields themselves in civilian dwellings." (Note: However, not all governors may be as effective with the media as Assadullah. End Note) The key point is that the Taliban will be detected by Afghan intelligence no matter where they gather and that they are safe nowhere. The Taliban gathering near Kandahar City, have, in some cases, taken over family compounds or religious schools and evicted their occupants. Assadullah's staff have been one of our major sources of information on the Taliban build-ups; he has repeatedly urged the coalition to attach Taliban-occupied compounds.

#### INFORMATION OPERATIONS

15. (S) Due to operational security requirements stemming from use of CJSOTF forces in the Azizi operation, there was no advance preparation of information for the Afghan media or the governor. In this case, the Taliban may have lost the tactical battle, but its propaganda is getting the jump on us. This could eventually create a perception among the

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Afghan public that the Taliban is resurgent and could retake Kandahar. Bluntly put, we could win the tactical battles but lose the strategic war for the confidence of the Afghan public.

16. (S) If villagers find that passive or active support to Taliban insurgents is risky business, they will be increasingly less willing to harbor them. However, one of the propaganda vulnerabilities we currently face is the fact that the operations to root out the Taliban in the south are sometimes conducted by coalition forces without accompanying Afghan National Army (ANA) forces. This creates an opportunity for the Taliban to claim that the coalition are foreigners killing innocent Afghan civilians. In general, including ANA forces in every coalition or allied military operation against the Taliban would be of great benefit.

#### AFGHAN FACE

17. (S) We will be discussing with the GOA of stationing a considerably larger ANA force, at least a full kandak (i.e., a battalion of about 600 troops) or ideally two full kandaks in Kandahar province, with one near Kandahar City. (Note: These deployments must be national decisions, taking into account other regional and provincial security needs. In the course of the coming two months, the size of NATO forces in the south will continue to grow, and their commander will have authority to move more robust forces to all provinces, depending on need. End Note) The U.S. combat battalion, "Task Force Gun Devil," which was previously stationed in Kandahar, was particularly effective when it conducted operations with the ANA First Battalion of the First Brigade with which it was "partnered." The joint operations were conducted in a manner that gave them not only an "Afghan face" but an Afghan lead in battle, making it more difficult for Taliban propagandists to claim foreign interference. At present, the Canadian battle group in Kandahar operates without the benefit of a partnered ANA kandak, which is a serious handicap in terms of winning the political victory.

18. (S) Stationing a larger ANA force in Kandahar would help to ward off the possibility of the Taliban's seizing a high-profile target in Kandahar City to grab newspaper headlines. Even if the Taliban were unable to hold a key target for very long, the impact of an audacious attack in Kandahar would be devastating to the GOA's image in the south and elsewhere in Afghanistan. Kandahar is a crucial province, one that no government has ever lost and stayed in power. If the Taliban can create fears in the Afghan public that Kandahar is slipping away, trust in the national government could be shaken throughout the nation.

19. (S) Embassy Comment: Many lessons are being learned from the Azizi engagement, lessons that reflect the complexity of the information operations challenge in this theater. This engagement points out the important need to lash up our post-fight notification channels with the interagency process and our international partners who can become force multipliers in the IO fight. CFC-A is endeavoring to apply all lessons learned, and improve its reaction times and coordination processes.

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